

Opinion Article

A Critical Analysis of Karl Marx's Conception of Society and Individual

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ABSTRACT: *To understand the concept of individual and society, as well as their interrelatedness is quite important since man is essentially social and his life is fully human when lived in fellowship with others. Karl Marx highlighted the concept of the individual as well as that of society. He showed equally the interrelationship between the two. However, this paper highlighted certain views of Marx which apart from being unacceptable, seem to be very impossible to attain. One of which is his idea or aim for a classless society in which there will be no more conflicts, no more struggle, no more exploitation, no more suffering, no more poverty, everybody will live in peace. Thus, the position of this paper is that it is absolutely impossible to create a society according to Marx's view. The paper also argues that conflict is an inevitable human characteristic that can either be positive or negative and not absolutely negative as Marx opined.*

KEYWORDS: *Society, Individual, Marxism, Materialism, Communism*

I. INTRODUCTION

Karl Marx, a German social philosopher and revolutionary was born in 1818. He was the son of a lawyer consequently, he studied law and philosophy. In the course of his philosophy, he rejected the idealism of G.W.F. Hegel but was greatly influenced by Ludwig Feuerbach and Moses Hess. He met Engels in Paris which marked the beginning of a lifelong collaboration. With Engels he wrote the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) and other works that broke with the tradition of appealing to natural rights to justify social reform, invoking instead the laws of history leading inevitably to the triumph of the working class. Karl Marx was exiled from Europe after the revolutions of 1848. He lived in London earning some money as a correspondent for the New York Tribune but dependent on Engels's financial help while working on his monumental work *Das Kapital* in which he used dialectical materialism to analyze economic and social history. With Engels, Marx founded the International Workingmen's Association in 1864, but his dispute with the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin eventually led to its breakup. Marxism has greatly influenced the development of socialist thought; further, many scholars have considered Marx a great economic theoretician and the founder of economic history and sociology.[1]. However, as we shall see in this paper, Karl Marx proposed certain views that are not only unacceptable but also impossible.

Marxism

Marxism is an economic and political philosophy originated propounded by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. The Marxist philosophical method, dialectical materialism, reverses the dialectical idealism of Hegel. Marxism holds that the primary determinant of history is economics. It views the history of society as “the history of class struggle” in which the bourgeoisie or capitalist class, which replaced the feudal nobility will inevitably be supplanted by the proletariat, or working class. The capitalist flourishes by extracting surplus value or profit from the commodities produced by the working class. Marxist theory predicts that the contradictions and weaknesses within capitalism will cause increasingly severe economic crises and deepening impoverishment of the working class, which will ultimately revolt and seize control of the means of production. In the resulting classless society, the coercive state will be replaced by rational economic cooperation. Marxism greatly influenced the development of socialism. After the 1917 Russian Revolution, many socialists dissociated themselves from Soviet Communism. Communist’s regimes, while claiming Marxist orthodoxy, have often veered sharply from it. The evolution of laissez faire capitalism in its various forms and the improved conditions for workers in industrialized societies, are believed by some to discredit Marxist economic predictions. Equally, Marxism’s close association with communism has already discredited it. Aspects of Marxist theory have, nonetheless, powerfully influenced Western philosophy, history, art, literary criticism and sociology[2].

II. MARX’S CONCEPTION OF SOCIETY

Marx sees society as that which does not consist of individuals but expresses the sum of interrelations, the relations within which these individuals stand. The Marxist goal is a classless society in which everybody will be free and happy. There will be abundance of production and every member of the society will have as much material goods as he needs. The final goal of the Marxist is a classless and stateless society in which there will be no more conflicts, no more struggle, no more exploitation, no more suffering, no more poverty; a society where everybody will live in peace with his fellow men. It will be a society made up of freed and regenerated men. A society in which all alienation would be overcome and where humans would recover their lost essence. In bourgeois society capital is independent and has individuality, while the living person is dependent and has no individuality. This is the problem Marx wanted to avoid. Furthermore, in connection with the concept of society is the **Dialectical Materialism**, an official philosophy of Communism, based on the works of Karl Marx and his followers. A reversal of Hegel’s dialectical idealism which holds that everything is material and that human beings create social life solely in response to economic needs. Thus all aspects of society are considered to reflect the economic structure, and classes in society are determined by their relationship to the means of production. Growth, change, and development take place through a naturally occurring “struggle of opposites,” a process that individuals cannot influence. Application of these principles to the study of history and sociology is called historical materialism, an approach having many non-Communist advocates[2].

III. MARX'S CONCEPTION OF INDIVIDUAL

In trying to discover the meaning of the concept of the individual, Marx defines the essence of man as having no abstraction inherent in each single individual, but in its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.[3] It is believed that this thesis of Marx is meant to be a criticism of Feuerbach who was said to have proceeded in his interpretation of the human essence from the notion of the isolated individual and believed that the individuals who constitute society are connected with one another "in a natural way." Meanwhile, Marx's definition of the essence of man as the ensemble of all social relations does not, according to the Marxists, imply that Marxism reduces man entirely to this social essence, that man's attributes are connected with physical existence. This is why Marx stated that when we consider man as an individual, he confronts us as "an aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in a human being." [4] The concept "man" is a generic concept expressing general features in the human race. A single member of the human race is generally referred to as an individual, but he possesses both general and individual features. For Marx, the individual is "a particular individual, and it is precisely his particularity which makes him an individual and a real individual social being"[5]. For the Marxist the concept of personality is inseparably linked with the concept of individuality and this individuality is expressed in a person's natural gifts and psychological qualities, in such specific features as memory, imagination, temperament, character, - all the diversity of human qualities and activities. Thus it is believed that the whole content of the consciousness - opinions, judgments, views, which even when shared by different people always have something of their "own" - also has an individual colouring. This is seen in the fact that every person's demand and needs are individualized and he leaves his individual mark on everything he does. An individual is a human being regarded both from the standpoint of his general qualities and features and from the standpoint of the individuality of his social, spiritual and physical qualities. These qualities may be positive or negative and usually combine, in varying proportions, both merits and shortcomings. Furthermore, Marx sees man as a doer, an active social being who engages in social activities and can change his conditions of life. He is equally a thinking and a feeling being. These qualities are inseparably interconnected. The Marxists therefore, define the essence of man and human personality concretely historical in its approach. For example, there exist some theories that reduce the whole of man's life activity to the manifestation of his "nature" essence, thus ignoring human history and the laws of social development. Other theories though make a certain appeal to the social factor, regard inclinations rooted in a person's mentality in the form of uncontrollable urges as a determining basis of man's consciousness and behavior. In reality therefore, the Marxists contend that people are the products of historically changing social conditions and circumstances and change with them. At the same time it is man who makes history. As a result what is needed to change people in the mass is none other than their historical, revolutionary practice, and radical transformation of the social conditions of life[6].

IV. SOCIETY AND INDIVIDUAL

For Marx, the interrelationship of society and the individual is above all an interrelationship of their interests. It is believed that since the beginning of the social differentiation of society the individual has been a member of the one or another social group, the interrelationship between the interests of the individual and the interests of society. This

interrelationships are however quite different in class-divided society from what they are in a society that is free of antagonisms. The pre-Marxist history of social thought regards the interests of the individual and those of society as incompatible. The ancient proverb: “Man unto man is a wolf,” was revived in the 17th century by Thomas Hobbes. Its popularisers maintain that the tragedy of human life is changed not by the contradictions and conflicts of classes, but by the contradictions and conflicts between the individual and society, which by their very nature are inextricable. Some bourgeois theoreticians absolutize the personal claims of the individual, demanding complete “freedom” of the individuals from society, others on the contrary demand that the individual should give up the very notion of independence. Hobbes maintain that the state was the “social and sovereign individual”, which did not recognize any individual besides itself. Man must therefore renounce his rights and grant the state unlimited power over himself. The points above bring out the hostility between the individual and society. The difference is only that the first seeks an escape from the conflict by proclaiming the unlimited freedom of the individual, particularly the “strong personality”, while the second demands the suppression of individuality and its absorption by society, the state, etc. On the contrary, Marxism-Leninism regards the conflict between the individual and society as a product of certain relations – the relations based on private ownership of the means of production. The essence of this conflict is that the development of a society dominated by private ownership, takes place at the expense of the interests of the majority of its members. In these conflicts therefore, the individual interests are opposed to the interest of society. Here one may ask, what are the interests of the society? It is believed that in knowing the interests of the society, one would also come to know the interests of the individual. Let us therefore, examine the interests of the society.

V. THE INTERESTS OF THE SOCIETY

The interests of the society are what it needs to function as a social organism on the basis of its inherent objective laws of development, not simply as the sum total of the interests of all its members. The fundamental basis of the social process is the progressive development of the productive forces of society and the modes of production change historically.

It is observed that, whereas before it was the interests of the society to establish private ownership of the means of production, separation of intellectual work from manual labour, concentration of the means of education among the upper selection of the society, who had sufficient time for the higher forms of activity, today the interests of society demand the abolition of both private ownership of the means of production and the antithesis between intellectual and manual labour. This in its turn demands the social organization of society. Under socialism society forms an integrated collective entity. All the groups of which it is composed – social communities, work collectives, various kinds of associations – are bound together by the community of their interests, which is rooted in the material needs of the whole society. Generally, according to Marx, even complete harmony between the interests of society and group interests does not imply their total identity. When society becomes socially homogenous, when class, nations disappear, society will still not become structureless. Various forms of activity will have corresponding collective and groups with their specific needs. The individual’s personal interests demand the satisfaction of his needs and the development of his gifts, energies and abilities. Many of man’s needs are connected with his existence as a

biological organism. But in as much as they arise and develop only in a social environment, they have a social nature rather than biological. Society creates both the needs and the means of their satisfaction. But the social collectivity of human needs is expressed in more ways than this. The structure of society often creates wide gaps between the needs of the people belonging to its various classes. The slogan of communism is: “from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs.” This presupposes the satisfaction of the reasonable needs of every member of society in constantly increasing measure. According to Marx and Engels, in answering the question, what are the conditions of the social environment that encourage the formation and development of abilities they said that, “only within the community has each individual the means of cultivating his gifts in all direction; hence personal freedom becomes possible only within the community[7]. The collective spirit is not a negation of freedom as it might appear. On the contrary, only in society, in the collective is personal freedom possible. But then, the collective makes definite demands on the individual, charging him with responsibility for the satisfaction of the interests of the community. Without this there can be no collective struggle for general class aims, or life together in socialist society.

VI. EVALUATION

At this point, we note that Marx’s view on the interrelationship of society and the individual is well founded. According to the Marxist, when society is based on private ownership of the means of production, it is split into antagonistic classes with mutually exclusive interests. In such social conditions the general framework of the individual’s personal life is pre-determined by his class affiliation, regardless of his individual gifts. Under capitalism for instance, the social status of the individual is determined by the amount of capital he possesses rather than by his abilities. Again, his conception of the individual as a social being that thinks and feels is quite true. According to Marx, man is essentially social and that life is fully human when lived in fellowship with others. Another is his view that the elimination of class and group irregularity, class and group privileges, makes a person’s future more and more dependent on his individual qualities, on his attitude to work [8]. This is true, but still there cannot be a society that is entirely classless. Meanwhile, there are certain views of Marx which apart from being unacceptable, seem to be very impossible to attain. An example is his idea or aim for a classless society in which there will be no more conflicts, no more struggle, no more exploitation, no more suffering, no more poverty, everybody will live in peace. Of course these sound so nice and wonderful, but can there be a society in which there will never be no suffering, no poverty at all? According to Heraclitus, one of the famous ancient Greek philosophers, conflicts and strife are the order of the universe. They are that which constitute things in the world. If one takes a closer look at the world of ours today, one would really notice that Heraclitus is right. Conflicts exist everywhere. This conflict is however not always negative. There are positive effects of these conflicts. Thus, it is absolutely impossible to create a society according to Marx’s view. Again, Marx contends that the abolition of private ownership of the means of production transforms society into a collective unity of all the social groups of which it is composed. This also has been found to be untenable, for there have been several cases where such was practiced and instead of leading to a collective unity it rather brought a disunity, conflicts and strife.

VII. CONCLUSION

It is worthy to note here that Karl Marx's writings appear to reveal his humanism as well as express his deep and sincere compassion and anger about the human suffering created by industrialization in the nineteenth century. Therefore we conclude by noting that Karl Marx's views about the ideal relationship between the individual and society shows that the individual is a profound social being whose needs can never be entirely satisfied without human interaction and community.

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